



NEHRU
MEMORIAL PUSTAKALAYA

The Day The River Spoke

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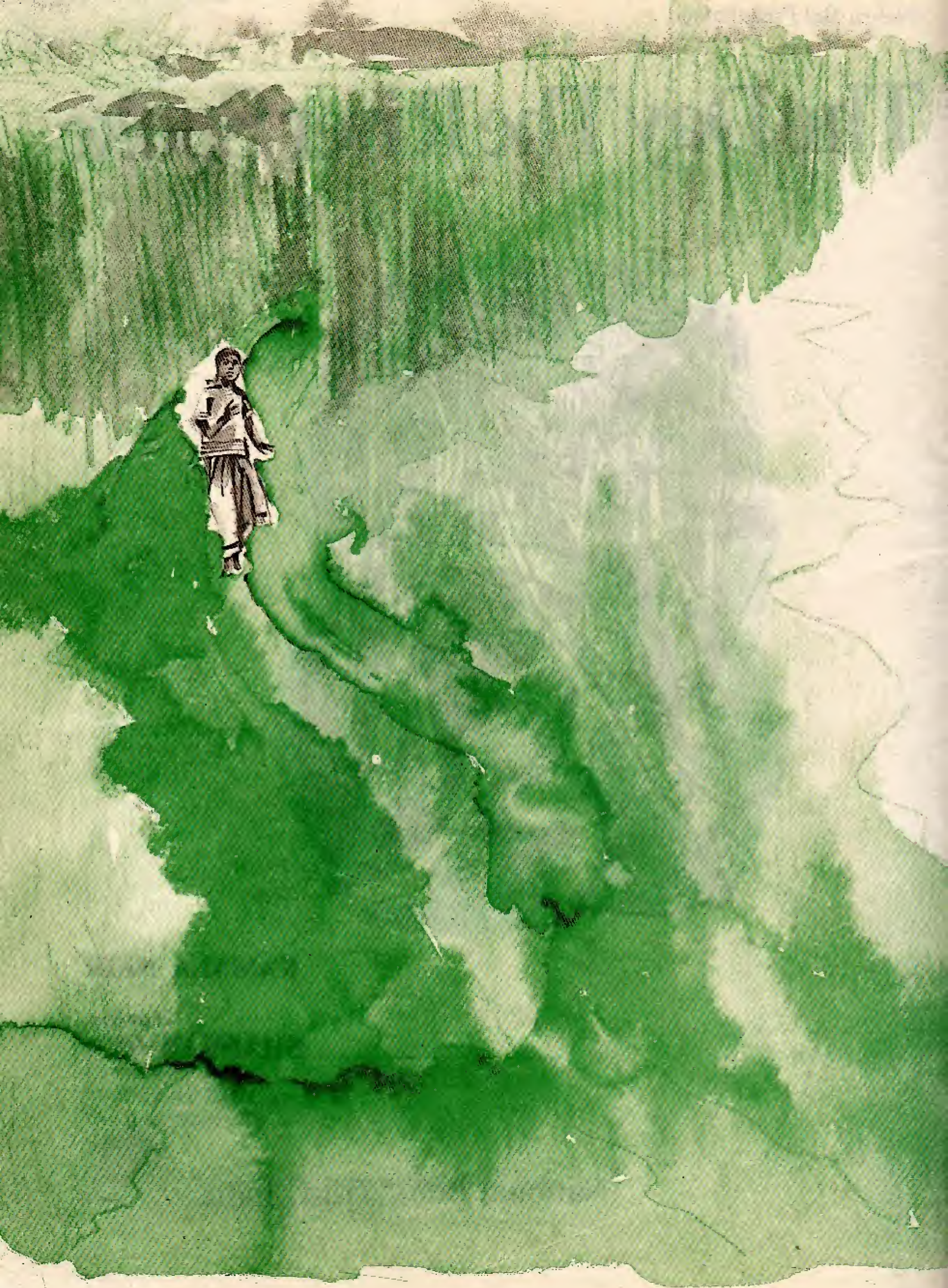
KAMALA NAIR

Illustrator

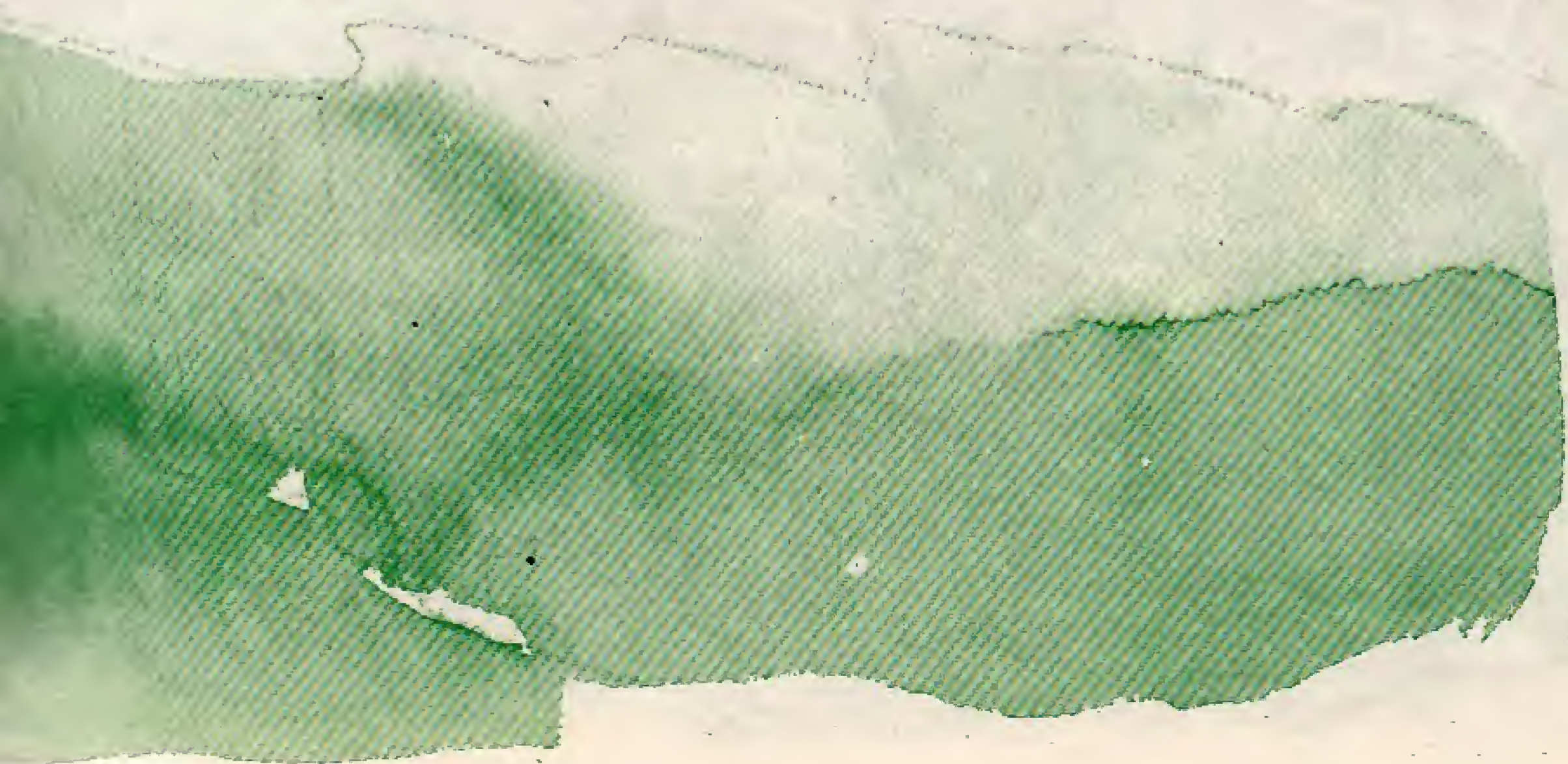
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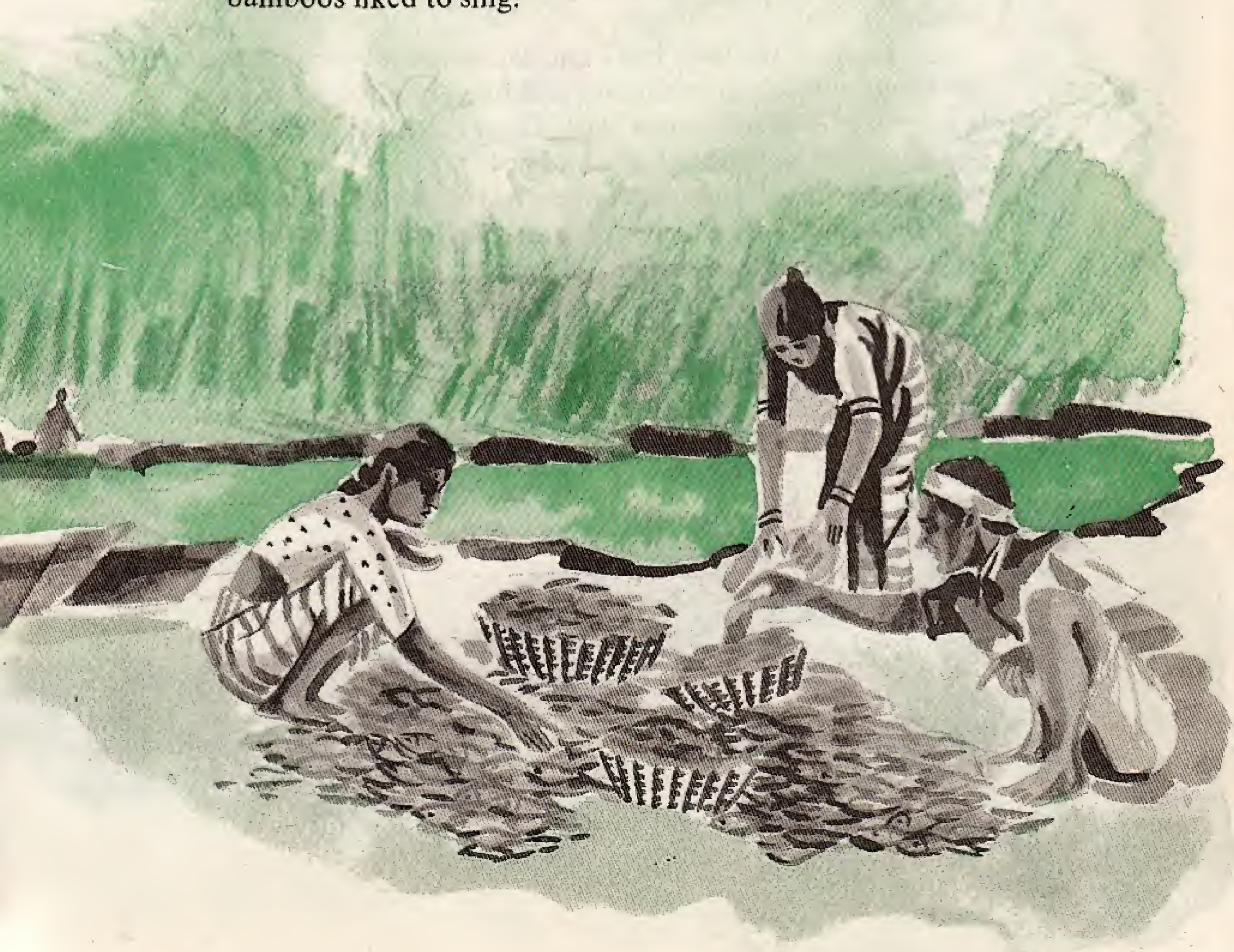
Janu wriggled through the gap in the bamboo fence and walked down the path between the paddy fields. The paddy lay green and soft as far as the eye could see—to the east where blue grey hills were tall against the morning sky, to the west till it met the railway track, and before her, southwards, right up to where the green river slipped and slid through shale and boulder to the sea.





She could not see the sea, of course. But Chandu, the fisherman, had long stories to tell of the river's journey to the sea and how skillfully he had to row his boat at the river's mouth. It was wonderful to listen to the stories Chandu had to tell and to see the fish he brought, rowing up river from the sea—the clams and mussels and the silvery sardines that all her village loved, and the dogfish that was cured and salted and hung from the kitchen rafter in a plaited basket made of palm leaves.

All along the river by the edge of the fields were the coconut palms, their leaves feathery in the sunlight, and when the big, round moon rose above the hills, the leaves were wet with moonlight and they rustled. Sometimes when the breeze swept through the bamboo clumps by the river one could hear a delicate “rat-tat-tat”—the reed song that the bamboos liked to sing.



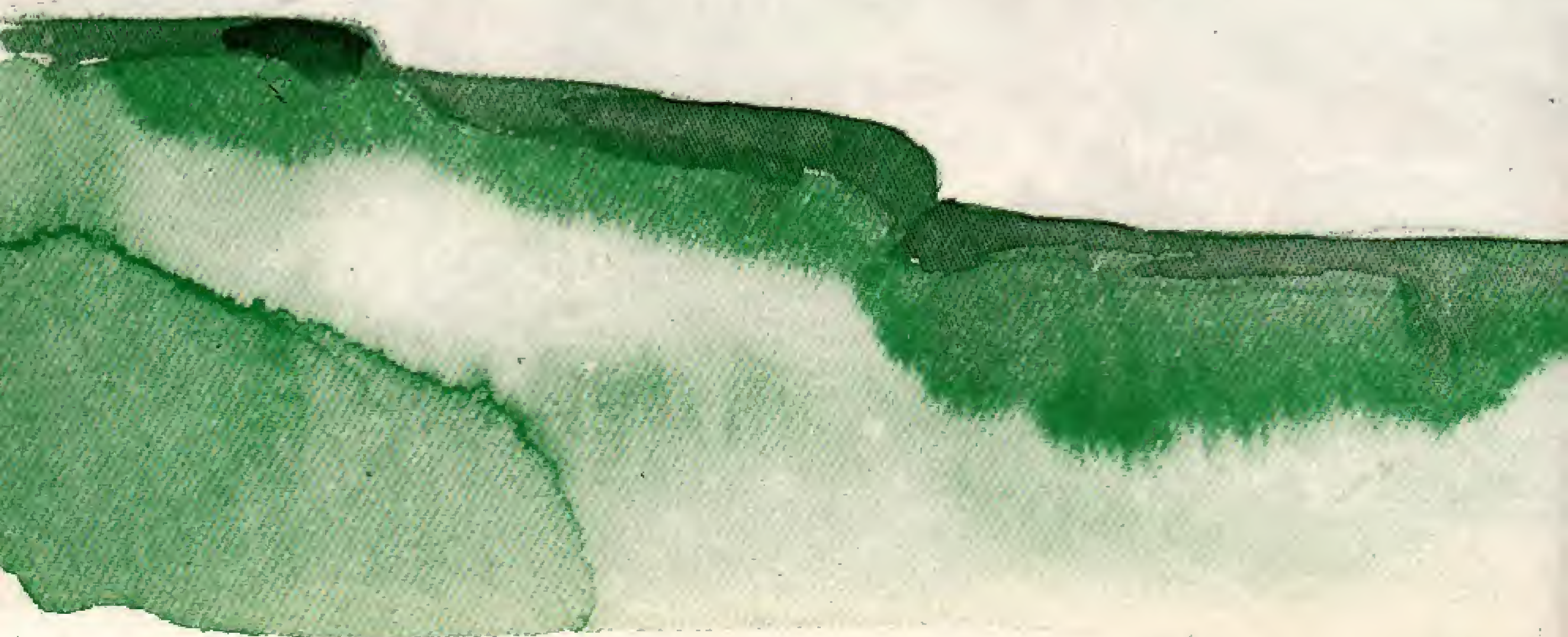
Janu walked a little slowly now, sniffing the salt air which blew landwards from the sea. Sometimes, she stopped to pick up the small flat stones which she saved for skimming on the still water of the tank in Meena's house. The red silk cotton tree was a glory of colour and the gnarled, twisted branches of the frangipani were laden with blossom. She plucked two, folding the petals back so that they looked like ear-rings. Their scent was lovely and warm and she put some in her hair as well.

She noticed a tiny yellow spider in the golden heart of a flower. She shrank from it at first, then she shook the flower, and the spider spun a long thread and fell to the ground. A tiny, golden spider.

"I hardly saw it at first," thought Janu, "it was so yellow, just like the flower." She had seen brown spiders and large black ones which always scared her, but never one this colour.

She reached the river bank and sat on her favourite rock, her hands cupping her chin. She had long, bright eyes which her mother had darkened with lamp-black and antimony and her hair was bunched up in a knot.

A green lizard slid from under the rock and disappeared into the bamboo. A copper-smith sounded its "Honk honk, honky tonk," in the distance. The river went past, its murmur soft in the stillness, and Janu said to herself—she loved talking to herself—"I've never seen a yellow one before. Why do yellow spiders hide in yellow flowers? I must ask Ettan."



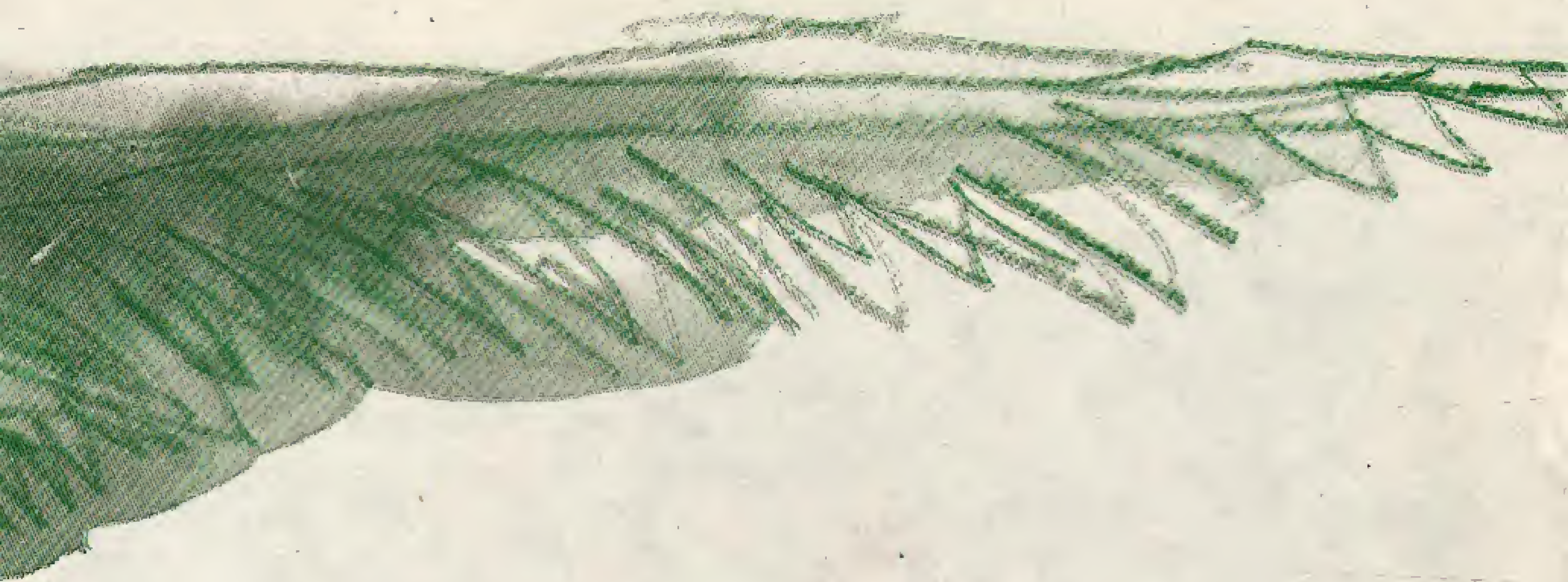




Ettan went to school where the teacher had taught him to read and write, and he used to sit in their verandah, loudly reading his lessons over and over again. All the boys in their village went to school, she noticed. But not all the girls.







Meena went, of course, but that was different. Meena had no brothers or sisters and her father was the village headman. Why, her mother even wore gold “zari” on her blouse when she went to the big town in the railway train, and she had a fine black umbrella, and Meena had one too, a small black one with a red tassel.

Most of the others in their village used palm-leaf umbrellas which they wore on their heads like a hat with a wide brim. It was much easier to work in the fields in rainy weather when one wore a palm-leaf umbrella, because it left both one's hands free, but a black umbrella was so much nicer to have.



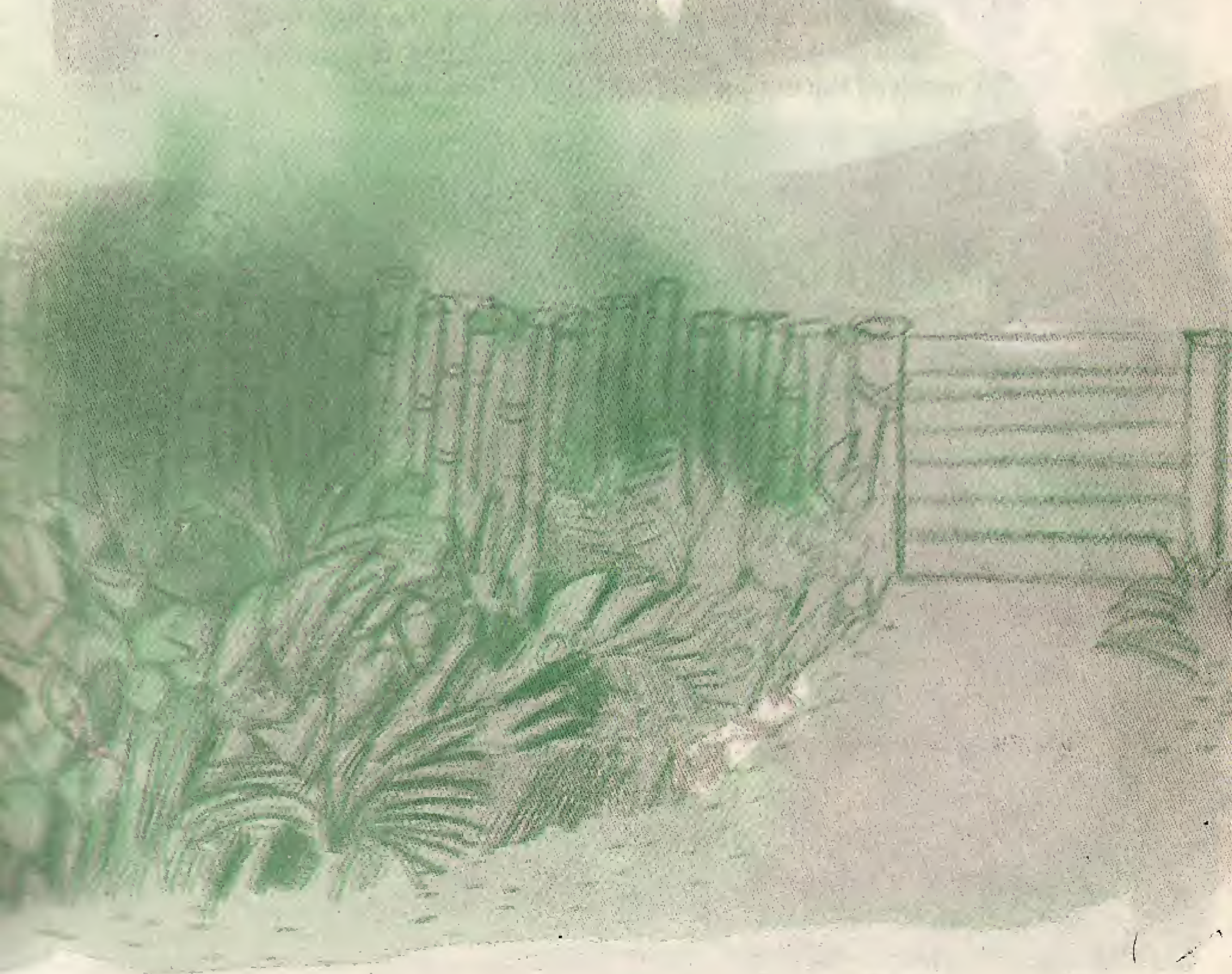
"Mother, why can't I go to school like Ettan and Meena?" Janu had asked.

Janu called her brother "Ettan" because Ettan means elder brother, but his real name was Gopi.

And Mother had replied: "You are too small, baby. Maybe later."

But when she was five, Little Ramu was born and Mother said: "Maybe next year Janu girl, mind your little brother while I go to the fields now."

Then Little Ramu was two, and then three and Mother said: "Hush your crying now. Ettan goes to school because he is a boy and boys must learn early. You be just my little girl and help me to clean the rice and fetch the wood. And you keep Little Ramu out of mischief."



"But Meena is a girl and she goes to school."

"Meena's father has a lot of money," said Father who had come in from the fields. "Sending girls to school, indeed! Learning to cook is what they need. And sweeping and pounding rice and helping in the harvest."

And Big Uncle who lay on his straw mat in the corner sat up and said: "What's that? What's that? Getting lazy, is she? A bamboo switch is what she needs," and then he choked because his wad of betel leaf nearly went down the wrong way and Mother rushed to pat his back to stop the coughing and Janu nearly wept because no one was listening to her.

"But I can do all that when I come back from school. I promise. Please, Father!"

"And who's to mind Little Ramu, I'd like to know?"

Janu looked at her mother and sighed. She looked very much as she did just before Little Ramu was born.





"Would you like to go down to Chandu and buy some sardines for the pot?" asked Mother kindly, changing the subject, and Janu took the coin Mother gave her and went down the fields to Chandu.

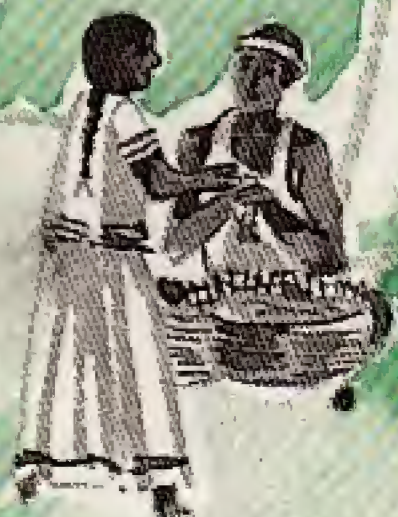
But Chandu only laughed when she said she wanted to go to school like Ettan.

"And what would you be doing in a school?" asked Chandu. "Bawling your lessons all together. Waste of time, I call it. Now if you said: 'Let me learn to make a net, let me learn to catch fish,' there'd be some sense. Schools!" Chandu spat with unerring aim into the water.



He wrapped the sardines in a piece of paper and said: "There, now. You run along home and learn to make some man a good wife one day. And tell your Mother sardines are coming scarce now. Next time it'll be dogfish!"

Ettan was twelve and growing bigger and Ramu was five and going to school and she was nearly ten and minding Little Appu who was the smallest. She came sometimes to the river when Mother wasn't looking, slipping through the gap in the fence. Down by the river everything was quiet and peaceful and she was happy. Mostly. But today wasn't one of those days.



A big bright tear splashed down her nose. And another. A kingfisher swept down, its wings an arrow of blue in the sunlight. And the green lizard slithered down to the river's edge to bask in the sun.

"Dear, dear!" said a sleepy, murmuring voice, "what's the matter?"

Janu started, because she was sure she had been quite alone. It couldn't have been the lizard. And the kingfisher was up in the bamboos eating the fish it had caught. It couldn't be the parrots, because parrots shrieked and this was such a sleepy voice. She looked around her. There wasn't a soul in sight. She was rather scared and wanted to run away.

"You shouldn't cry, you know," the voice went on. "And you really shouldn't be scared, when you have been coming here to see me every day well, almost every day."

She started uncertainly. It was such a murmurous sleepy voice, like the river. It couldn't be the river!

"Well, tell me all about it," said the River, for it was the River. "I've got to hurry to reach the sea, you know."





“They won’t let me go to school,” said Janu. “They don’t want girls. They only”—she stopped with a sob—“only want boys. And I’m so old now, they’ll never let me go. And I want to go. I want to learn to read like Ettan and Meena. I want to know why spiders are yellow in yellow flowers, why the bamboos rustle, why the moon always comes from behind the hills, never the other way, why the baby fish in the field water become frogs, why...”



"Stop!" said the River. "You make me breathless. So many why's! I can tell you where the moon goes," he said conspiratorially. "She goes down towards the sea. I've seen her; she always takes the same way—over the mountains and down to the sea, like me!"

"Even Little Ramu goes to school," said Janu bitterly, "Pity the school isn't by the sea," said the River. "Then I could take you along, you know. But I suppose I couldn't really. You'd get your feet wet. And that would never do! No, there's only one thing you can do, I'm afraid!"

"I can do something?" asked Janu. "Well, it's up to you," said the River. "Seems to me little girls can do as much as little boys—they swim as well as little boys. You just slip along one morning and sit there in the school and listen to what's going on, and maybe the teacher will let you stay."

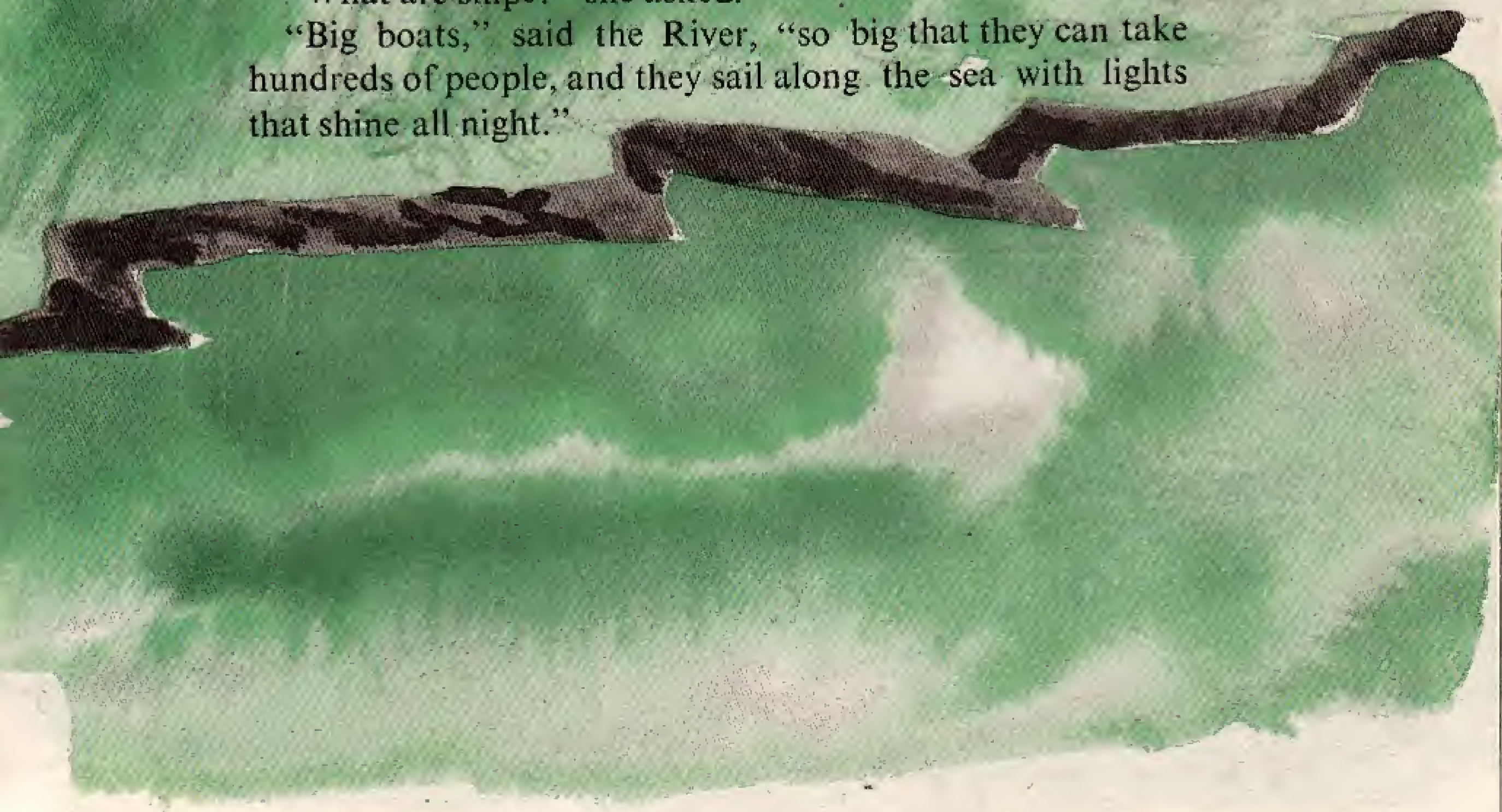
"I couldn't," gasped Janu. "I couldn't! They'd scare me. They'd chase me out."

The River laughed. "You? Scared?" he said, "when you're not afraid of the green lizard, or of the snake in the bamboo clump," (Janu started) "or the big trains rattling past that bridge. Trains are noisy, I prefer ships," said the River.

Janu forgot to be scared of the snake she'd never known was in the bamboo clump.

"What are ships?" she asked.

"Big boats," said the River, "so big that they can take hundreds of people, and they sail along the sea with lights that shine all night."



Janu held her breath. "Will they come here?" She asked. "I'm afraid not," said the River. "Too large, you know. Chandu's catamaran is good enough for me, Chandu can take you to see a ship, some day"

"They'd never let me!" wailed Janu. "Oh, why am I a girl?"

"Try going to school first," said the River. "Remember—it's up to you!"

He sounded sleepier than ever and Janu could hardly hear him now. She rubbed her eyes and sat up. It must have been a dream. But when she scrambled down the boulder, carefully skirting the bamboo clump before she got to the path through the fields, she thought she heard the river chuckle. A slow, sleepy chuckle.

She'd done it at last, but it hadn't been easy. First of all she'd had to wait till Father went to the fields and Mother began the cooking. Then she combed her hair and put on the red ribbon Meena's mother had once given her. Big Uncle had finished his early meal of cold rice and salted mangoes and was asleep. Little Appu was sucking a contented thumb and Ettan and Ramu had already left for school.

Ramu was using the slate Ettan used when he first went to





school and which, when no one was looking, Janu used to borrow just to draw pictures. Very quietly she would draw Chandu's boat and the bamboo clump and the school. On the slate you could draw things and rub them out and draw again.

She put Little Appu down on the mat and went towards the fence. Little Appu let out a howl. She went back hastily and picked him up. Little Appu gurgled happily and pushed a chubby fist into her face.



She said under her breath: "I suppose I'll have to take you now. Only if you start crying when we get there, I'll—I'll throw you into the trees and the parrots will come and take you away."

She reached the school panting and out of breath and stood by the door listening while the teacher read out the lesson. It was a story about a prince called Asoka who became a great king. Little Appu had fallen asleep on her shoulder. She crept nearer and nearer till she was in the back row squatting with the others on the earthen floor. Little Appu made no noise and she listened.

The teacher was asking questions. Everyone was busy turning over the pages and holding up a hand to answer and when the questions were finished, the teacher said: "Now I have a surprise for you. Next week we shall take the train and go down to Kozhikode and there we can see the big bazaars and the tile factory and I shall show you the sea and the lighthouse."



There were delighted shouts from the class.

"Please Sir, what is a lighthouse?" asked Kutty, the weaver's son.

"It is a big building shaped like a pencil—a huge pencil—with a bright light at the top that shines very far, so that the ships at sea can sail safely."

"Is a ship like a catamaran, Sir?" asked Nanu whose mother lived all by herself at the edge of the clearing by the forest. He walked two miles to school and back every day.

"Now who can answer Nanu's questions?" said the teacher and Janu forgot Little Appu and her fear and her



shyness and said clearly: "It is much, much bigger than a catamaran, big enough for hundreds of people to live inside and . . ." she stopped.

All eyes were on her and Little Appu who had been jerked out of sleep when she got up to answer, let out a wail. Janu panicked.

"Where did you spring from, little girl?" asked the teacher. "And what is your name?" You're new in my class. And haven't I told you, all of you, not to bring your little brothers and sisters here? Whose little boy is he? Who brought him here? Hey? Answer me!"

The teacher's spectacles nearly fell off and the class was a forest of shiny black heads all nodding, all whispering. Janu's lower lip trembled. "J-Janu, sir. He . . . He's my little brother. I didn't mean to make him cry. I didn't mean. . ."

"She's Gopi's sister—Gopi is in the next class," said one of the boys.

"It's Janu," said another.



"She is Uncle Gopalan's little girl," said a third.

And the teacher said: "Come here, Janu. All right, all right, pick him up and bring him along too. Come here to my desk. Now, all the others can go."

She went in fear and trembling and little Appu sobbed with fright at the strange faces round him. The children trooped out into the sunshine, leaving her alone with the stranger. She held Little Appu close for comfort. She no longer wanted to go to school. School without the children inside was terrifying.



"So you're Gopi's little sister? Nice lad, Gopi," said the teacher, peering at her over his spectacles. "I suppose he doesn't know you're here."

"I suppose your mother thinks you're lost. And your little brother, too. Now tell me, why didn't you come to school before?" He held out a pencil to Little Appu who looked shyly at him and finally grasped it in his chubby fingers.

By the time the teacher had heard from Janu all about how she couldn't go to school it was past midday, and when she went home her mother was so worried that she scolded Janu from sheer relief, and her father said he'd take a stick to her back one of these days, roaming about when there was work to do, and much more; in the way her father always spoke when he came home tired.

But her secret was her own, like the bright shiny copper coin she polished with tamarind juice and put away carefully under her mat each night. Of course, when Gopi came back from school, everyone would know about her escape. But no one knew what the teacher had told her—her bright shiny promise which she held tight to her heart like her copper coin which glinted in the sunlight.

"If you really, really want to come to my school, Janu," the teacher had said, "we'll talk your father into it. Don't you worry. We'll find a way."

Meena had laughed at her story. Meena always laughed a lot and when she did, the dimples came and went. Meena said it was all over the village, the way Janu had just walked into school, and Meena's father thought it a pity that some boys didn't have so much spirit and Meena's mother said: "Wait till she grows up, she'll shake up this place, I've no doubt."

Then Meena had said: "Let's swim a bit, shall we? Race you to the tank." And she had pulled Janu into the water and they raced each other swimming to the other side and back.

"School is fun," Meena said, shaking her damp curls. "You'll like it. I hope your father will let you come. My father says that if you really study hard, you can go on and on and on, maybe even to High School."



“And after High School? asked Janu, though she didn’t know what High School was. But Meena didn’t know the answer to that. Not yet.

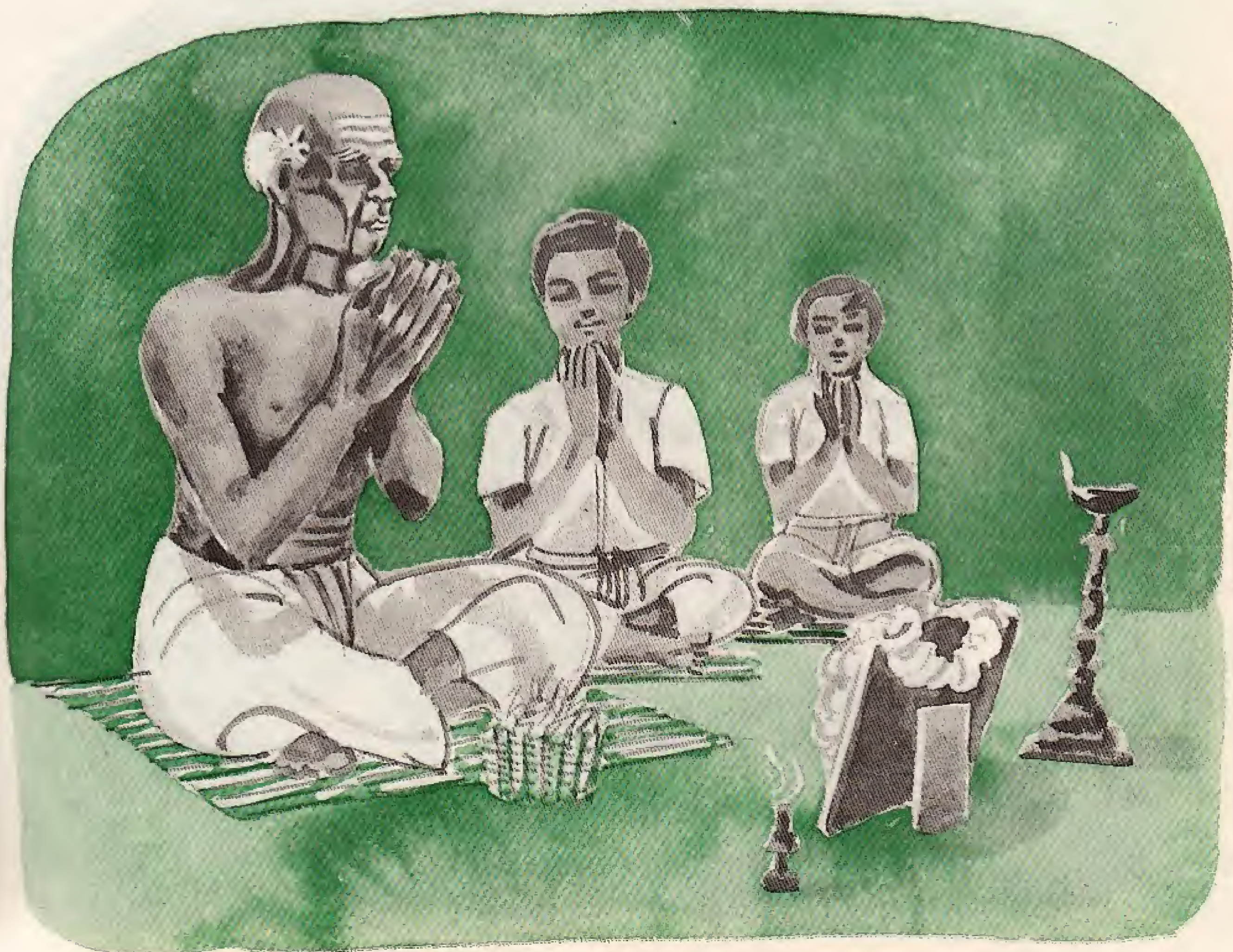
Janu saw the teacher walking up the steps to their gate the next evening when she was lighting the lamp. She lit the lamp and brought it to the front verandah and set it down on the step, a tiny winking light to bless their home. Big Uncle had a sprig of *tulsi* leaf behind his ear, and was chanting his prayers and Ettan and Ramu joined in, little Ramu stumbling over the big words. She was too excited to pray. To chant them with Big Uncle, that is. But, she did say a prayer all by herself. Not loud, but a small prayer which she hoped God would hear.



She could see her father scratching his cheek the way he did when he was worried and the teacher was nodding and saying something she couldn't make out. Then he offered her father some betel leaf and tobacco to chew and they chewed it in a friendly way by the bamboo fence.

"Little Janu, I shall miss you when you go to school," Mother said. "They do say nowadays that girls should learn like boys—when I was your age I wanted to go to school, but your grandmother said 'No,' but now, I am glad the teacher came to talk to Father.

"He came yesterday too when you were at Meena's house. He thinks you can study just like Gopi, and I want Gopi to grow up and pass his examinations and work in a big building as they say Meena's uncle does, far away in a place called Delhi—so far it takes three days to reach there by train.



“But what will you do, Janu girl, if you go to school now? You’ll learn to write your name and maybe to sew with that big machine, like Meena’s mother, but we won’t have any money to buy a machine, so it’s no use thinking of that. Well, if you’ve set your heart on it, I suppose there’s no stopping you.”

And she sang to Little Appu:

O little Koel, little black bird,
Don’t you know the season’s changed?
Comes the wind and comes the rain
Won’t you build your nest again?



And Janu cried, "Mother!" and went and threw her arms round her mother's neck and hugged her tight. "When I grow up," she said, "I'll be a teacher and I'll go from house to house in our village and ask all the little girls to come to my school. And I'll teach them all I'm going to learn. You'll see!"

With a hop, skip and jump she went down the path between the fields the next morning before school began, and sat on her favourite rock, the red ribbon in her hair and a yellow flower.



"I did it!" she told the river. "I was scared, but I did it! And they're letting me go. I'm going to learn to write my name and do sums and find out why our little fishes in the ricefields turn into frogs and see the lighthouse. One day I'll see a ship," she nodded to the river.

And the river slipped and slid between shale and boulder and held its green course among the bamboos, and the coconut palms.

Janu took the frangipani blossom from her hair. "Take this to the sea for me, dear River," she said, "and hurry, hurry, or you'll never reach there."

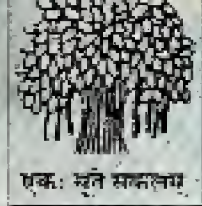
She turned back to look as she went past and there was the white and yellow blossom floating down the current. She was sure it was a dream the day the river spoke, but here she was actually going to school with a red ribbon in her hair and that wasn't a dream.





She ran between the tall green fields. And way behind her she thought she heard the river's sleepy chuckle: "Come again, little girl, and I'll tell you all about the ships that sail the sea," he seemed to be saying, but of course, it could have been just the breeze sighing through the ricefields in the morning.





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